

PEARL REHABILITATIVE COLONY FOR UNGRATEFUL DAUGHTERS

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Henry Lien was born in Taiwan. He studied International Relations at Brown University, attended UCLA Law School, practiced law for ten years, embarked on a career as a fine art dealer in Los Angeles, and also began teaching university courses. At forty-two, Henry finally snapped, came out openly as a sci-fi/fantasy geek, and attended Clarion West in 2012, where he developed the world of Pearl, which will continue in his upcoming novel *The Taming of the Pearl*, the first of a trilogy. Henry also wrote and recorded “Ready to Launch,” the campy space opera class anthem of Clarion West 2012 (visit www.henrylien.com to view the performance). Henry dedicates his first sale to Chuck Palahniuk, who workshopped this story with Henry at Clarion West and who taught him a lot about heroes.

I am called familial name Jiang, personal name Suki, although I prefer to be referred to as Her Grace, Radiant Goddess Princess Suki, and I think that this is the stupidest essay ever assigned and I think that Pearl Rehabilitative Colony for Ungrateful Daughters is the stupidest place under Heaven.

You wish us to write this essay about what we have done and learned during our sentence here at Pearl Colony. You have “Wicked Girls Return as Good” carved over the entrance gate. You think that girls can be humiliated into excellence. You think that we can be shamed into preparing for the examination for Pearl Opera Academy next year by making us say that we are lazy and ungrateful. Think whatever you want. I do not have any “acts of undutiful disrespect of my Honorable Parents”

to confess in this essay because my parents were stupid to send me here. Piss me off to death!

Even if they had wanted a boy. Even if I was adopted. If they did not want me, they could have just thrown me away with the kitchen trash instead of sending me here to be tortured to death.

I want to go home.

Except my stupid, stupid parents are there.

I miss my cat. I fear no one has been tinting her fur while I have been gone.

Most of all, I miss my hair. Aiyah, I think I am going to cry again. My beautiful hair. My legendary hair. And all you nuns were so mean to me when you cut it off.

"You are not going to cut my hair," I say to the nuns.

"Mistress Suki. Your parents have sent you here so that we can save you from your own undutiful nature. You shall learn to obey so that you can learn to excel. And we shall cut your hair."

Half the girls have gone through the line and all submitted to having their hair amputated by the nuns without fighting back.

I say to the nuns, "I have my hair massaged and dressed twice each month at the most high-grade beauty sanctuary in all of Tsukoshita Bay by a former first assistant to the second personal lady-in-waiting of the Empress Dowager." And they think I am going to permit them to touch my hair? Make me die of laughing! "You are just a bunch of ugly, talentless nuns who hide here because you could not survive in the real world."

"Aiyah!" they cry. "How dare you say such things to your elders, you wicked, ungrateful girl?"

"Is that not the sort of thing that wicked, ungrateful girls say?"

"Aiyah!" they all gasp. "You shall learn your place, wicked one!"

All of the girls are looking away from me. Except one girl. What is she staring at? As the nuns come at me, I prepare to enter combat position and I dig the inner edges of my skates in. The surface of the pearl under my skates feels a little too grippy. They think that the pearl here at Pearl Colony is high-grade pearl, but it is just common road-grade pearl, as sufficient for skating on as any other street or handrail or rooftop in the city of Pearl, but really unacceptable for fighting on. The entire miserable campus of Pearl Colony is made out of this cheap road-grade pearl. Why do they even bother? They might as well just make buildings out of cut rocks and tree slices like primitives used to before they discovered the pearl, or like out in Fallen-Behind places like the Shin mainland.

The four nuns prepare to encircle me. However, they are not Academy-level practitioners of Wu-Liu. Since no other form of Kung-Fu is performed on bladed skates, any weakness in either skating training or combat training leaves you full of weaknesses in the combined art form of Wu-Liu. I can see just from how the nuns shift their weight that none of them received equal training in both skating and combat.

They skate in a circle around me, tighter and tighter, hoping to rein me in like a frightened animal. The wrong technique, as this leaves their wall of defense no stronger at any point than one person deep.

I prepare to skate with full force into one of the nuns, and enter into position to perform the two-palm lightning butterfly block chop. As she sees me charging her, the old turd crouches down into position to perform the incredibly stupid five-point fire chicken move and I am laughing so hard, I almost lose hold of my position. Make me die of laughing! I change the energy flow of the nun's ridiculous pecking hand and use the fulcrum of her elbow to send her hand slapping against her own shoulder.

I break out of the circle and cartwheel into a double-toe flying jump. I land onto a

curved, ornamental retaining wall made out of the pearl and skate along its top away from the nuns.

Behind me, the four nuns leap onto the wall one after another. They skate in pursuit on the top of the undulating wall behind me in a line, rising and falling with the rhythms of the wall like a New Year's dragon. A slow, ugly New Year's dragon. Do they really think they can ever catch me?

But then, behind them, I see someone. She is skating hard. From the way that she balances on one skate and pushes behind with the other skate, I can tell that this girl has received proper Wu-Liu training and that she is not without talent.

It is the girl who was staring at me in the line for the hair amputations, with the long, straight hair like a waterfall and the stinking expression on her face. As she catches up with the train of nuns, she extends her arms straight out. She knows the lightning lotus forward flip! This girl has received some serious Wu-Liu training. I see her cantilever and flip on the axis formed by her own arms and sail over the entire train of nuns to land in front of them.

As she closes the distance between us, she begins to do one lily pad forward flip after another, building her momentum and gathering her center of Chi. Pump, flip, glide. When her center of Chi is fully gathered, she unleashes it into a seven-fingered somersault flip. She catapults over my head and lands in front of me.

I reach out and grab her long length of waterfall hair as she lands. Wah! Her hair is silky and beautiful. It is hard to get a grip on it, as it feels like it was dressed with whale placenta extract. This girl must come from money.

The girl's fist shoots out and twists itself into my hair. Aiyah, she is going to crease it! In the distance, I see the four nuns skating in a line toward me, like some evil, brown sea serpent. The one in the lead has a sword drawn.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I cry at the girl with the waterfall hair. "Who are you?"

The girl does not answer.

"They are going to cut your hair, too!" I scream at her. "Why are you helping them?"

"Because you talk too much," says the girl with the waterfall hair.

We continue to wrench each other's beautiful hair, neither of us releasing our grip. Aiyah, I am crying thinking about all that beautiful hair being creased but it is as if she does not even care! Then, when it is clear that neither of us will gain the advantage over the other, the girl pushes me as far away as my grip on her hair will allow. With her hair stretched between us, she does a strange sort of twisting single-toe flip that I have never seen before and *uses the blade of her own skate to cut through her own hair*. It makes a sickening sound as it cuts through, half creak and half crunch, as if I had just skated over somebody's arm. She twists free of my grip. I am holding her length of beautiful hair that must have taken ten years to grow and thousands of taels to dress, and I am so shocked and sickened by her mutilation of herself that I drop my defense.

In that moment, she whips me in a half circle by my hair and sends me sliding into the four nuns. They grab my limbs and, with one ringing swing of the sword, amputate my beautiful, legendary hair.

Aiyah, why me? Why me? Why me? I want to die.

But first, I must have my revenge on this evil, evil girl.

I learn that the evil girl who helped the nuns to amputate my beautiful hair is called familial name Liang, personal name Doi. Her father is Chairman of New Deitsei Pearlworks Company. They live in a compound at the top of Dowager's Peak.

It turns out that Doi Liang was in fact Baby Swan Doi. Of course! When she was ten years old, Baby Swan Doi became the youngest person ever to win first place at the Season of Glimmers Pageant of Lanterns Wu-Liu Invitational. Her short routine,

"The Dragon and the Swan," became a sensation because of the interplay between the train of taiko drummers on skates thundering after her and her little fluttering swan moves to evade the dragon. But people say she ran into some "trouble" and disappeared from view and no one has heard anything about her in the last four years.

Doi Liang's parents probably sent her to Pearl Colony to clean her up and stage a comeback so that they can make sure she passes this year's examination to get into Pearl Opera Academy to properly complete her Wu-Liu training.

I suppose that some people might think that she is a little bit more beautiful than I am, but her mouth is too wide and her complexion has exactly zero radiance. Also, she is always looking down at the ground, so you cannot even tell if her eyelids are monolid or duolid.

By the end of the day when they amputated my hair, I have gotten all twenty-four girls enrolled at Pearl Colony to make vows of sisterhood with me to take down that Doi Liang and get her kicked out of Pearl Colony at all costs. No one likes a traitor.

If Doi Liang gets kicked out of Pearl Colony, there is no way that Pearl Opera Academy will ever accept her. Not with an expulsion on her record. She will never perform legitimate Wu-Liu again. She will never get cast in a role again, except in some variety show production called "Has-Beens of Wu-Liu" or "Nobodies on Skates" or else some topless skating chorus in a saloon in Cleanside.

But the question is how can we get her kicked out of Pearl Colony? Normally, girls get kicked out for smoking sinkweed or violating curfew or getting caught with boys in their rooms, but this one is so uptight she probably wipes her ass with lace scarves.

On the first day of class, we are presented with the perfect way to get that Doi Liang kicked out. When we assemble on the training court on the first day, we are all devastated to see that our Wu-Liu instructor is Sensei Madame Tong. She is an instructor at Pearl Opera Academy. However, she also wrote that ghastly parenting guide *How to Raise Dutiful, Successful Children the Traditional Imperial Way* that has been giving our parents stupid ideas. Piss me off to death. How am I going to survive three months under her rule?

However, the lesson system and grading plan that Sensei Madame Tong sets forth for us that first day give us the perfect path to get that Doi Liang kicked out of Pearl Colony.

"Wicked, ungrateful daughters," says Sensei Madame Tong. She would be beautiful if she did not purse her lips so much.

"Question: What is the greatest cause of all evil in this world? Answer: Undutiful children.

"Question: What is the greatest joy that a person can have in this life? Answer: To show respect to one's esteemed parents.

"As we start our first day of lessons at Pearl Rehabilitative Colony for Ungrateful Daughters, let us remember the story of young Mei-Ching the Dutiful, who, when her parents were too old and weak to work, chopped all the trees on the mountain where they lived to give them firewood, then cut off her own head to make soup to feed her parents.

"You shall be subject to a Motivation at the end of each of the three months of this term. The Motivation is an examination to make you all perform your best and place as high in the rankings as you can. You shall be ranked from first place to last place based on your performance during the Motivation.

"Your final rankings after all three Motivations shall be taken into consideration when you take the entrance examination for Pearl Opera Academy next year. Further, after each Motivation, the girl ranked in last place shall be expelled, as a reminder to all of what happens to lazy, ungrateful girls with no virtue or excellence."

All of us girls start whispering in excitement to each other, and then we all look at that Doi Liang. We will seize every opportunity when Sensei Madame Tong is not looking to sabotage her and take her down and get her kicked out of Pearl Colony.

On that first day, Sensei Madame Tong starts us with three hours of basic tan-toe kicking and drills. No toilet breaks.

At the end of the three hours, she allows us to rest for five minutes. We can choose to either rest or rush back to the dormitory compound to try to use the two toilets there.

Then she has us immediately start with six hours of jumping drills. At the end of the first three hours, we are allowed a five-minute break, but instead of allowing us to rest, she makes us kneel directly on the hard pearl, with our skates on, and listen to the nuns recite poems from the twilight of the Zhang Dynasty of the empire of Shin. They mumble on and on about how the empire was brought down not by the floods following the Great Leap of Shin, but as Heaven's punishment for all the ungrateful children in the empire.

Several girls pull muscles during the last three hours of jumping drills. One girl even slips on a triple jump and falls, cutting her leg with her own skate. We all rush to help her, but Sensei Madame Tong does not permit us. She says the girl has dishonored her parents and wasted their money by failing in front of her Colony mates and she should be made to feel the full force of her shame so that her parents get their money's value.

At the end of the last hour of jumping drills, Sensei Madame Tong has the Shinian servant girls skate out with our dinner, a bowl of wakame miso soup with a scoop of rice dropped in it. She announces that only girls who are able to successfully do a combination triple scissor kick quadruple spin will be allowed to eat. And we each get only one try.

Only a few girls manage to do the combination triple scissor kick quadruple spin on the first try. I am one of them. Two of the others who succeed are sisters, Chiriko and Yoneko, whom I already knew because their parents are friends with my parents. I think it was their parents who gave my parents a copy of Sensei Madame Tong's book, though, and gave them the idea to send me to Pearl Colony. Piss me off to death. But then they were among the first to agree to help me get Doi Liang kicked out, so then we became very close friends again.

Also, another girl named Lin-En did the combination move successfully. Her father is a high-ranking bureaucrat in the Tariff Blockade Ministry. Sweet girl. She seems to want to become friends with me very much. She is not talentless, which is a good thing, since no one is going to give her a role based on her face.

And also that girl Doi Liang. She also did the combination on the first try.

Sensei Madame Tong makes the five of us eat our bowls of soup in front of the other girls, who are denied any dinner. When we have finished, Sensei Madame Tong orders the Shinian servant girls to take the uneaten nineteen bowls of soup and empty them into the ocean. Then we are sent to bathe and go to sleep.

We thought that that miserable first day was just Sensei Madame Tong's way of scaring us, but no. That first day was just the beginning of a month of terrible days.

At the end of each day, Sensei Madame Tong tallies the points of all the girls made during the jumps for the day. She continually adjusts our rankings based on our performance and posts them outside the principal skating court.

The top five rankings never change day to day. I am ranked first, of course, and Chiriko and Yoneko are ranked third and fourth, and then sweet Lin-En is ranked fifth.

That Doi Liang also ranks pretty well. Too well.

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At the end of the first month, we face the First Motivation. Sensei Madame Tong reveals the full depth of her evil by making us take a twelve-hour Motivation. For the first eight hours, we do endless competitions testing kicking, jumping, spins, free hand combat, footwork routines, short weapons combat, and long weapons combat. For the last four hours, we are tested on combining these skills with lyrical skating and carving figures into the pearl with our skates.

At the end of the First Motivation, the results are no surprise. In the top five positions, I am first, Chiriko and Yoneko are third and fourth, and sweet Lin-En is fifth.

And that Doi Liang is ranked second.

The pretty, fair-skinned girl with the big eyes is ranked last. As we watch her pack up her belongings and leave the colony in failure and shame, my heart is filled with a thousand strains of sorrow and tears roll down my face because it is not that Doi Liang that is getting kicked out.

I cannot just stand aside and do nothing about this. I have to do something. We all have to do something.

At the beginning of the second month at Pearl Colony, Sensei Madame Tong tells the remaining girls that we will spend the next month preparing for the Second Motivation, the Imperial Tea-Service test.

The Imperial Tea-Service test requires you to take a little teacup filled with hot tea. You are required to skate a circuit atop the perimeter wall encircling the campus of Pearl Colony without spilling the cup of tea. Everyone is ranked by how quickly they complete the circuit. However, if you come back without at least half a cup of tea left, you fail.

When Sensei Madame Tong has finished explaining the rules, all the girls look at me, and then we all look at that Doi Liang.

This will be easy. During the Second Motivation, we will all attack Doi Liang when Sensei Madame Tong is not looking and knock the tea out of her cup, causing her to fail the Motivation.

The second month turns out to be far more difficult than the first. We train for fourteen hours each day. We have not only to practice all the moves that we trained during the first month. We must also learn the architecture of the perimeter wall that we will be skating on during the Second Motivation. We must learn how to navigate the towers, turrets, and minarets that break the wall, and how to use adjoining rooftops and balconies to avoid the obstacles and overtake each other, since the wall is only one skater wide. And we must learn to keep our cups in such perfect balance during all of these leaps that we do not spill the tea in them.

On the day of the Second Motivation, we are all lifted up in joyful anticipation of the opportunity to take out that Doi Liang. We take our cups of tea and form a pack at the starting line.

Sensei Madame Tong counts down. "San. Ni. I. Let fly!"

We all burst and flip or cartwheel onto the perimeter wall and set off. Because the perimeter wall is only wide enough for one skater at a time, we all must follow along in a line. However, you can sprint when you skate past the rooftop of an adjacent building and do a diagonal three-point skid-step to pass somebody.

Doi Liang keeps trying to pass the skater in front of her and move to the front of the line. However, we anticipate her moves and we work in unison against her like a school of fish.

When we skate to a point that is blocked from Sensei Madame Tong's view by the natural geography of the campus, we all let loose with our combat moves at Doi Liang, trying to make her spill her cup of tea.

She is taken by surprise at the assault from ten sides. She performs quite well considering all those arms and skate blades coming at her.

She quickly changes to the Pulling Hands technique, grabbing the girls' limbs as they come at her, using the forward motion of their moves against them, and turning sideways to let them fly past her. The girl is not talentless, I must say that.

But she is no match for so many girls. She is blocking off four girls who have stopped curbing their kicks and appear to be aiming open blades at her. If they are going to be using illegal moves on Doi Liang, I cannot stop them.

Then, as Doi Liang passes the rooftop of the dormitory, little Lin-En skates up from the left side and slaps Doi Liang's cup of tea. Good girl! It flies up in the air. Lin-En ends up skating right through the cloud of tea droplets, which stain all over her uniform robes. But at least we have succeeded in our mission. For Doi Liang snatches her teacup as it tumbles in the air and it is completely empty.

As we skate into view of Sensei Madame Tong again, I see that not only have I made Doi Liang come in last place, I am going to come in first place.

See. Do not underestimate Her Grace, Radiant Goddess Princess Suki. No one will shame me. No one will deny me. As I streak down the finish line in first place, I sing out triumphantly,

"No dutiful daughter am I!

"No father or mother ruled by!

"Behold me, for I am the Radiant Goddess!

"I fly up and rip down the sky!"

I finish first, Doi Liang is right behind me but with an empty teacup, then Yoneko, then Chiriko, then Lin-En.

I am glad to see that sweet Lin-En managed to place in the top few places again. For some reason, I am cheering for that girl. I skate over to her and say, "Keep skating like that and when we get to Pearl Opera Academy, I will start a sisterhood and you can be my first lady in waiting." From the look of happiness on her face, you would think that I just gave her a gift of the moon. Sweet, open-hearted girl.

When all the girls have crossed the finish line, it turns out that everyone finished with their cups at least half full except for Doi Liang. I figure that that means that she places twenty-third, dead last in this Motivation, and she will be expelled! I am overcome with joy.

"What happened when the rise of the hill obscured all of you from my view?" asks Sensei Madame Tong. "Mistress Lin-En. Why is your uniform covered with tea?"

Lin-En cries, "Doi Liang fell in front of me and spilled her tea on me."

Sensei Madame Tong's neck and face fill with color. "Do not lie to me, worthless, shameful girl! Doi Liang has not fallen once during these weeks of training."

Lin-En begins to stutter and protest, but Sensei Madame Tong turns instead to Doi Liang.

"Mistress Doi. Did you fall and spill your tea?"

Doi Liang is silent, then finally answers in her low, hoarse voice, "No."

"Did Mistress Lin-En slap your teacup out of your hand?"

Doi Liang does not look at Sensei Madame Tong. She does not look at Lin-En.

She looks straight at me.

She says, "Yes."

"Mistress Lin-En," says Sensei Madame Tong. "Go pack your things. You are expelled."

Brave Yoneko skates to the front of the group and protests. "You cannot do that to Lin-En! You have no right to just disbelieve her!"

I have never seen an adult turn so furious. "You are expelled, too, Mistress Yoneko! For disrespect to a Sensei. Now get out of here!"

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That night, after Lin-En and Yoneko are escorted out by the evil nuns, we also learn that Sensei Madame Tong calculated the rankings in a different way from how I thought. After expelling Lin-En and Yoneko, twenty-one girls were left. Thus, Doi Liang's finishing last means that she finished in twenty-first place. However, that combined with her second place ranking in First Motivation means that she averages out to between eleventh and twelfth place overall. Not last place. And not expelled. Instead, the tall girl with the beauty mark on her chin averages in last place and is expelled.

Piss me off to death. The girls all want to make Doi Liang pay for what she did to Lin-En and Yoneko and they want to enjoy watching her pay.

But I know it was not Lin-En and Yoneko that she was trying to hurt. It was me. And she succeeded.

Poor Lin-En. We were becoming friends. And she slapped Doi Liang's teacup to get revenge *for me*. Now she is going to pay with her career. There is no way that she is going to get into Pearl Opera Academy with an expulsion on her record, especially for cheating and lying to a Sensei. Such a waste of talent. And what is she going to do with her life now? The world is not a kind place for homely girls. I should know. It is people like me that make it so. Ah, poor Lin-En!

And poor Yoneko! She was only speaking up for Lin-En, as I should have. But did not. And now her career is ruined, too. And she comes from an important, public family. Oh, how they will punish her for the shame she has brought on their public face.

If I accomplish nothing else in this life, I will at least see that that Doi Liang is destroyed.

For the next two weeks, I look for opportunities to sabotage Doi Liang without breaking any rules myself, but there is no opportunity since there are no tests until the Final Motivation at the end of the month. For the entire time, we only practice pairs Wu-Liu.

We are surprised at how long this training lasts. We all hate it. It is very difficult work because you have to be careful not to strike or kick your partner with your skate blades, while learning to use her as a second pair of arms and legs, while taking on an opponent. None of us is feeling very confident about how we would test in pairs work right now.

Except for me, of course. I am equally trained in single and pairs combat. I am skilled in all twelve of the zodiacal pairs moves, in either head or rear position.

The only small beacon of joy during this time is that that Doi Liang is doing horribly! She tore a cord in one arm defending herself during the Imperial Tea-Service examination and has had it in a sling ever since. Watching her have to work so hard during training to reroute her Chi around the injury and watching her Wu-Liu suffer terribly for it fills my heart with peace.

Sensei Madame Tong is furious at our lack of progress in pairs work. After two weeks of nothing but pairs drills for twelve hours each day, she gathers us on the training court for a speech.

"Worthless Girls of Pearl Rehabilitative Colony. Your performance in pairs Wu-Liu has been disgraceful. If I were you, I would beg my parents for permission to commit ritual suicide out of shame for how I have disgraced my ancestors with my laziness and lack of excellence. You are all of you selfish, conceited girls. None of you has learned anything about the virtue of teamwork.

"There is going to be a change to the grading system. For the rest of the term, you shall work only in pairs. For the Final Motivation, each pair shall receive one grade, so that every girl's grade shall be tied to her partner's.

“You are all allowed to choose your own pairs partner. Choose wisely.”

There is much chattering among the girls at this. You can imagine all the drama and possibility for wounded feelings this will create.

“One exception to the right to choose. It is clear from the Second Motivation that none of you shall choose Mistress Doi Liang as a partner. Yet, she needs a partner, so Mistress Doi Liang has the right to choose anyone she wants as her partner.”

All eyes turn to Doi Liang.

Doi Liang looks at Sensei Madame Tong.

Then Doi Liang turns her head and looks straight at me.

No, no, no.

No, oh, no, no, oh, no, oh, no, oh, why, oh, why, oh, why me?

Why me, why me, why always, always me?

Aiyah! I want to die.

Doi Liang raises her one good arm, points a finger at me, and says, “Her. I choose her.”

That night, I write a letter to my father and my mother.

“Esteemed and Honorable Parents,

“I know you think I am a worthless daughter, but how could you send me to such a stupid, stupid place? Why did you not just tie me in a bag and throw me into the ocean when I was born? I know you wanted to, because I was not born a boy. Tell me the truth. I was adopted, was I not? I always knew it. That is why you never loved me, no matter how gentle and sweet a daughter I was. But even if you never loved me, you did not have to send me to a stupid place like Pearl Colony to be horribly tortured to death like an animal. I hate it here, but not as much as I hate you. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.

“Your Worthless, Unloved, Female, Adopted Daughter, Suki.”

How am I going to survive this term at Pearl Colony? My first place ranking combines with that Doi Liang’s eleventh place ranking so that it averages out to somewhere around sixth place. The evil nuns keep saying that the brutal training at Pearl Colony prepares all girls for the examination to get into Pearl Opera Academy, but everyone knows that no one but the top two or three finishers here ever get into the Academy.

And with her stupid crippled arm, how are we ever going to complete the Final Motivation successfully? It was fun to watch her struggle during training to compensate for the injury and try to perform the moves with only three fourths of her limb strength. We all loved watching her fall and splatter flat on the pearl again and again as she tried so hard to reposition her center of Chi to balance out the injury. We all laughed so hard and it was beautiful, but now it is not funny any more. Piss me off to death.

Also, this girl is dangerous and insane. And she hates me for no reason. I am afraid that it might be more important to Doi Liang to see me get kicked out and to ruin my career than for her to save her own career. What would it matter to her? She will never again be as famous as she was when she was Baby Swan Doi. She was already used up at ten years of age.

We train in the twelve zodiacal animal pairs moves. For moves where one skater plays the head and one skater plays the rear of the animal, there is always a silent struggle between that Doi Liang and me about who will play the head, but she always yields.

The side to side pairs moves are easier with her, but I hate having to hold her cold, rough hand, and we keep having to modify the moves to accommodate her stupid injury.

Two days before the Final Motivation, Sensei Madame Tong announces that she is going to have us fight against actual Pearl Opera Academy students at our Final Motivation. Aiyah, we are so unready for this.

On the last day before Final Motivation, Doi Liang and I are training in the Swinging Monkey routine together. During the entire final week, she has said nothing to me. Not one word.

As we practice racing along the perimeter wall of Pearl Colony, I finally grow tired of her silence.

"Why do you not ever talk?" I say. "What is wrong with you?"

She says nothing.

I say what I suspect is going to be a sore spot, to try to provoke a reaction from her. "Everyone knows why you disappeared for four years after you got famous as Baby Swan Doi." Actually, I am still working on learning exactly what the trouble was that she got into that made her have to hide from public view all those years, but I figure that it is worth a try. "You and your parents think you were so clean in covering it up, but everybody knows. I cannot believe you do not realize that. We all talk about it and we all think it is just disgusting."

No reaction. "But what does it matter now? You are much too old and used up to perform 'The Dragon and the Swan' ever again. You will never be limber enough again to do that little swan move where you grab your skate behind you and spin like a blossom. Which was a vulgar little gimmick anyway."

Still no reaction. Piss me off to death. I have to be more creative. "I know about your brother."

She does not look at me.

"I know what you are thinking," I say, making it up as I go. "Your mother had a difficult pregnancy with twins. And you know that if they had had to choose one twin to sacrifice to save the other, you would not be here, would you. See, there is nothing about you that I cannot see." I shoot this arrow into the air to see where it will land.

She still says nothing. She still does not look at me. However, I can tell that she is not looking at me only through great self control. I can see these things.

"Well," I say, "do not think that you have some special right to act so tragic just because of that. My parents wanted a boy. And I think that I was adopted. But you do not see me going around feeling sorry for myself about it."

Aiyah, just thinking about it makes me start to cry. It is so unfair. Why me? When all I have ever wanted was for them to treat me like a human being, not some worthless embarrassment.

As we skate toward the central minaret in the middle of the perimeter wall, we begin swinging each other in half-moon sweeps and passing the fulcrum of our collective Chi back and forth between us. I hate having her evil Chi in my body, even for a moment. As we approach the minaret, we press our bodies together. We launch our bodies off into the space to one side of the minaret. We whip in orbit around each other like a pair of thrown nunchaku, but we wobble because of her stupid injured arm throwing us off. The centripetal force is barely enough to arc us around the minaret and land us on the other side.

As we land, Doi Liang says, "Do not be stupid. It cannot be both."

I am so surprised to hear her speak that I say nothing.

She continues in that low, hoarse voice, "If your parents wanted a boy, why would they have adopted a girl? They are certainly rich enough to adopt a boy if they wanted. Either they wanted a boy, or you are adopted. It cannot be both."

I am stunned by her outrageous presumption. How dare she bring up my private family matters.

* * *

That evening, I keep thinking about that Doi Liang's words. "If your parents wanted a boy, why would they have adopted a girl? Do not be stupid. It cannot be both."

My face grows hot again thinking about her daring to talk about my private family matters.

But I cannot stop thinking about her words. "It cannot be both." If my parents were rich enough to adopt a boy . . . either they wanted a boy and I am not adopted, or they did not want a boy, and they adopted me.

Who is this girl to be trying to twist my mind? So arrogant! So unfeeling!

Yet, somehow, I am not as angry about it now as I was this afternoon.

It must be because I am exhausted from the week's training.

When the Final Motivation begins, we see that there are eight students from Pearl Opera Academy. Three pairs of girls and a pair of boys. Each pair representing a different difficulty level. We get to choose which difficulty level we want to attempt, and the boys are the highest difficulty because they are boys. And third year boys!

Most of the girls choose to fight against other girls. We all trained with the assumption that the pair we would have to defeat is girls, and all the girls have been training in moves that are focused for girl to girl combat.

Then, one brave pair of girls chooses to fight the Academy boys. So stupid of them. They find themselves unable to use their all-girl pairs moves to knock the boys off their skates and make them fall down. They make the mistake of flinging themselves directly at the boys. I watch them get knocked down by the boys before even completing one circuit of the perimeter wall of Pearl Colony. Stupid girls, why did they not lead the boys off of the campus and into narrow streets in the city? Combat on an open plane does not take advantage of girls' flexibility over boys. Sensei Madame Tong never said that we must limit the combat route to the campus.

Another pair of girls goes next and they choose to fight the pair of second year girls. After them, it will be our turn to skate. We still have not been able to eliminate the wobble in our combined center of Chi to compensate for Doi Liang's arm, especially when we are passing the Chi between us. And even if we could, how can I know whether she will go insane again just to take me down?

"You are better than they are," I say to her. "You want to win this. More than you want to take me down."

She says nothing.

But I see that I have struck a Chi point. I press all the way in. "You have people you want to say something to with this. So do I. If we win this, I will not have helped you and you will not have helped me. I will have advanced myself. You will have advanced yourself. It will just have happened at the same time. That is all."

She turns to look at me.

"Deal?" I ask her.

She says nothing. She looks at the boys. They are lazing about as if none of this cost them the least effort.

"What do I get out of it?" she says.

"What do you mean what do you get out of it? You get to win! You get to hold on to your chance to get into Pearl Opera Academy! You get to not lose face! You get to not shame your parents."

She says in that weird, low voice, "What makes you think I do not want to shame my parents?"

Oh, no, not now, she is going insane again. "What do you want, you crazy girl! Tell me what you want!"

"If we win," she says slowly, "then you have to keep your mouth shut for a whole day."

"What do you mean keep my mouth shut? What a stupid thing to say. Are you insane?"

"And if you break the promise, I get to grab and crease your hair every time you speak."

"Fine! Whatever! Just do not mess this up."

She makes me write down and sign the promise and rolls the scroll into her skate. She is so weird. "So do we have a deal?" I ask.

"Deal," she says.

It is our turn. Sensei Madame Tong asks what difficulty level we choose. Without looking at each other, Doi Liang and I both point to the boys.

We join the pair of Academy boys and take our position behind them on the top of the perimeter wall.

They crouch in position to burst away from us.

We assume the position to chase after them and prepare to unleash a Warring Sisters move at their backs like the other girls did.

Sensei Madame Tong lifts the trumpet of whale bone to her lips.

The clarion call sounds.

The boys bound away from us along the perimeter wall in a flurry of powerful lunges.

Instead of chasing after them, we turn the other way and hop over to a parallel aqueduct leading out of the campus of Pearl Colony and skate as hard as we can into the city of Pearl.

We hear the cries of surprise behind us. We see the boys half a li away from us re-alize our sabotage. They scrape to a stop, do one-footed backflip half-turns, and come pumping toward us. Sensei Madame Tong and the remaining girls also skate in a flock to follow us and see what will happen.

The aqueduct we are skating on opens onto an elegant waterfront garden district and twists toward a half-moon bridge arching over a sculpted, false canal. We ride the aqueduct as it slopes down, approaching the bridge, then leap off in a powerful combination single-toe double-heel spin onto the bridge and into the little tea pavilion there.

The boys bear down hard toward us. As the aqueduct slopes down, they both fling themselves into a triple axel scuttling scissor blossom spin, aiming their skate blades at us.

Before they reach us, we do a double-toe roundhouse and spring off at an angle. The boys speed after us as we lead them into in a forest of close, tall alleys, deep in a fashionable residential district.

We skate down the alleys, whipping to the left and the right into side-alleys to try to lose the boys and double-back on them, but they keep up with us.

We lead them into a long straight lane of slender townhouses leading toward the waterfront. We see the glimmer of light on the water of Aroma Bay in front of us at the end of the lane.

Ah, but our center of Chi still wobbles! Piss me off to death. She is trying, but we cannot stabilize the Chi.

The boys pump hard toward us and crouch down, forming the Charging Ox position. When they have gathered their Chi, they spring at us.

When we hear their skates leave the pearl, Doi Liang and I entwine our arms together so that we join into a position with no arms and four legs. She winces as I grab her crippled arm, sending a wave rocking through our Chi, but we hold on to it. At the last possible moment, we get it right and execute the Leaping Rabbit pairs move and leap up out of their way.

The boys attempt to reposition and aim up toward us, but they are unable to lock onto us as our trajectory wobbles. The unstable Chi is helping us! Like the Drunken Hen move, our random lurches are as unpredictable to our foes as to us.

As the boys slide under us toward the bay, they struggle to untangle from the Charging Ox position, but in this narrow residential lane, they cannot burst apart out of the position as they are trained to do and they used too much force in too small a space.

As they slide toward the bay, Doi Liang and I change in mid-air from the Leaping Rabbit position to the Charging Ram position. We curl our arms to form the ram's horns and channel the rest of the Chi from our downward trajectory to batter into the boys.

Our impact, the remaining Chi from the boys' Charging Ox move, and the boys' own weight combine. The momentum is too much for them to stop in time. We send them crashing through a grove of false cherry blossoms planted by the water. They go flying off the edge of the boardwalk in an explosion of pink petals straight into Aroma Bay, ending in two splashes so far away that they look like little plumes of dolphin spray.

As soon as we see that we have defeated the boys, Doi Liang and I untangle our limbs and push each other away as fast as we can.

Sensei Madame Tong and all the other girls catch up with us. They gaze in astonishment at the third year Academy boys in the sea, swimming back toward us. The girls look at each other and then bow to us. Doi Liang bows back to them as if they were honoring her. Her! Make me die of laughing!

Then that Doi Liang bows to Sensei Madame Tong, reaches into her skate, and gives her the scroll that I signed! Sensei Madame Tong reads the scroll and says, "Good."

She bows to Sensei Madame Tong again and says, "I have waited three months for a day of quiet."

If she thinks I am going to let her talk about me like that in front of everyone, she is even stupider than I thought! I skate up to her. "Do not think that they were bowing to you! Your stupid crippled arm almost lost us—Ai!" Doi Liang's hand shoots out at my head, grabs a fistful of hair, and squeezes! Aiyah, she has creased it! Three months of sleeping with a rolled cloth under my neck to allow the hair to grow back straight, and she has ruined it!

I start to do the double-bladed mantis chop move on Doi Liang's arm, but Sensei Madame Tong shoots me an iron stare. She is taking that Doi Liang's side! Piss me off to death!

Doi Liang releases my hair. It is still only at the level of my chin, so I cannot see how badly she injured it, but I toss it side to side and can feel from how it swings that that passage of hair is permanently creased and ruined.

"You stupid, ugly, low-grade—Ai!" Doi Liang's fist is suddenly in my hair again, squeezing and crushing! "Do not do that, you crazy dog fart, you are going to—Ai!" Her other fist shoots into my hair! Her crippled arm is still strong enough to bend my hair. "Let go, you evil, insane—Ai!" Both her fists tighten and twist in my hair!

Out of the border of my vision, I see the two Academy boys climb out of the water onto the boardwalk. Oh, no, I cannot let them see me like this!

"Not in front of boys! Let me go, you stupid, stupid—Ai!" Doi Liang's hands perform the ten-spoked churning maw move right in my hair!

The boys come and join everyone to watch.

I think I am going to faint.

When she finally releases my hair, my hands reach up, afraid to discover how terrible the injury is.

My hair is so creased and crooked and matted and frizzed that it feels like I am wearing a giant bird's nest on my head.

I think I am going to vomit.

Then the boys laugh and applaud.

Why me, why me, why always, always me! I want to die!

* * *

I receive my Certificate of Successful Penitence from Pearl Colony. The victory against the boys finished us in first place. But I feel no victory.

For that Doi Liang and I are not done.

We are not equal.

We are not even.

We are tied.

So now, you ask us all to write this stupid essay to our parents about what we have learned during our sentence here at Pearl Colony.

Well, I will tell you what I learned here.

Nothing.

Not one stupid, stinking thing.

You tell me that I am a wicked girl, but you just hate me because I am more determined to be myself than you were ever strong enough to be.

You cannot shame me. You cannot deny me. For I am Her Grace, Radiant Goddess Princess Suki. I will take the entrance examination for Pearl Opera Academy and I will prevail.

Next year at Pearl Opera Academy, I will have skated out of here and forgotten you, and you will still be nuns, ugly, talentless nuns.

Next year at Pearl Opera Academy, I will battle this evil girl again and I will prevail.

Next year at Pearl Opera Academy, I will win the lead role in the Drift Season Pageant and in Beautymarch, and I will be crowned Super Princess of Wu-Liu.

Next year at Pearl Opera Academy, I will make my stupid parents so sorry that they ever sent me away that they will beg me to forgive them, but I will not care because I will have already forgotten who they are, as everyone under Heaven will have forgotten them, as the nobodies that they are, while my name will live forever in glory.

Next year at Pearl Opera Academy, I will be a Legend. ○

Beyond violet there's ultraviolet; beyond red, infrared.

My eyes are wide; flowers glow long past dusk

While in the dark of night lovers shine hotly.

Reality has other dimensions hidden orthogonally
(as it's called) away from the customary four.

So I began to paint in subyellow and suprablue,
Colors perpendicular to the visible spectrum.

At a further right angle is my famous J series

In jed, jellow, jreen, jlue, jindigo, and jiolet.

Visitors to this gallery may perceive blank canvases

Although they will feel disconcerted

Since I depict my dreams and nightmares

Which can be sensed unseen as absent presences.

Some very challenging paintings seem invisible;

Obviously those ones cost the ultramost.

—Ian Watson

Catalogue Note by the Artist

